

# Realism and Idealism: US Policy toward Saudi Arabia, from the Cold War to Today

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In his 2005 inaugural address, President George W. Bush said, “America’s vital interests and our deepest beliefs are now one. . . . So it is the policy of the United States to seek and support the growth of democratic movements and institutions in every nation and culture, with the ultimate goal of ending tyranny in our world.”<sup>1</sup> This ambitious pronouncement represents the keystone of the Bush Administration’s foreign policy. US foreign policy around the world—and especially in the Middle East—rests increasingly on this belief that a more democratic world not only coincides with American values but is consistent with America’s interests as well. This belief directly contradicts US policy in the Middle East during the Cold War. For almost five decades, US policy in the Middle East operated on the assumption that democracy there would jeopardize US political and economic interests. Indeed, during a November 2003 visit to England, President Bush declared, “We must shake off decades of failed policy in the Middle East. Your nation and mine, in the past, have been willing to make a bargain, to tolerate oppression for the sake of stability. Longstanding ties often led us to overlook the faults of local elites. Yet this bargain did not bring stability or make us safe. It merely bought time, while problems festered and ideologies of violence took hold.”<sup>2</sup>

If the Bush Administration sincerely believes that freedom and democracy in the United States depends on freedom and democracy abroad, then sooner or later the path of reform must go through the House of Saud. The attacks of 9/11 brought to light the central ideological and financial role of the Saudis in international terrorism. The road to reform in Saudi Arabia, however, will likely traverse treacherous ground that could endanger US po-

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litical and economic interests. Therefore, US policy toward Saudi Arabia and the wider Middle East should cautiously balance American idealist values and realist interests, patiently and prudently applying the lessons of recent history. Before analyzing US policy toward Saudi Arabia during the Cold War and developing a strategy for the future, it is important to gain a better understanding of these realist interests and idealist values.

### ***Dueling Ideologies: Realism and Idealism***

When President Bush speaks of “vital interests,” he is expressing a notion grounded in the realist worldview of international relations. This school of thought finds its roots almost two and a half millennia ago in Thucydides’ *The Peloponnesian War* and was formalized as international relations theory in the 20th century by prominent political scientists such as Hans Morgenthau and Kenneth Waltz. An important uniting concept in many realist theories is the notion that the domestic political character of nation-states matters little in determining their international behavior. Rather, in an international system without a dominant ruler, states attempt to increase their security by maximizing military and political power and the economic prosperity on which they are based. Generally, realists suggest that human nature or the structure of the international system determines state behavior, not whether the state is democratic or authoritarian.<sup>3</sup>

On the other hand, President Bush’s reference to America’s “deepest beliefs” is firmly rooted in the liberal or idealist school of thought. This worldview is based on the idea that governments derive their legitimacy from the consent of the governed, and that these governments should respect the human rights and basic freedoms of their citizens. For most of American history, US leaders focused primarily on the implementation of these values at home, saying the United States should be the “standard of freedom and independence,” but the “champion and vindicator *only of her own*.”<sup>4</sup> However, in the wake of World War I, President Woodrow Wilson attempted to ultimately banish war by creating a comprehensive international system of collective security and economic interdependence among constitutional democracies. Borrowing from Immanuel Kant’s *Perpetual Peace*, Wilson argued that international “peace and justice” could be ensured by establishing a world of “free and self-governed people.”<sup>5</sup> Relying largely on Wilson’s ideas, modern pro-

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ponents of democratic peace theory suggest that democracies are less likely to fight each other due to domestic political constraints found exclusively in democracies, the favorable perceptions democracies have toward one another, and the free-market economic ties that typically develop between democracies.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, contrary to the realist worldview, idealists believe that the most important characteristic of other states is not their military or political power, but their form of domestic government. In the aftermath of 9/11, President Bush adopted many of these ideas, arguing that a world of democratic states will be more peaceful and less likely to produce terrorism.<sup>7</sup>

These two schools of thought in international relations—realism and idealism—have framed the essential US foreign policy debate at least since World War II. For over 50 years, the United States struggled to develop a foreign policy that reflected its idealist values but simultaneously protected US interests and promoted US power. In some regions, realist and idealist policy prescriptions coincided comfortably, pointing in the same direction. In Europe and Japan, for example, US political, military, and economic interests were served by creating constitutional democracies in those regions. In other regions, however, US leaders believed realist-based political, military, and economic policies, though conflicting directly with America’s liberal democratic values, best served US interests. For example, in countries such as Guatemala, Iran, South Korea, and Zaire, the United States neglected its idealist values by supporting authoritarian regimes and in some cases even overthrowing democratic ones.<sup>8</sup> When American leaders spoke of “self-determination” and “independence,” by and large they meant sovereign, stable, and pro-Western regimes—often authoritarian—free of communist influence. In short, during the Cold War, the United States viewed realist interests and idealist values as mutually exclusive in the Middle East.

Saudi Arabia represents the perfect case study regarding the relationship between realist interests and idealist values in US foreign policy. Since the formal beginning of US-Saudi relations in 1933, Saudi Arabia increasingly represented one of America’s most important allies and simultaneously one of

the most oppressive authoritarian regimes in the world. The Saudi regime has epitomized the antithesis of American idealist values, yet its oil reserves and strategic location have made it immeasurably important to the United States and to the world. As the United States attempts to reconcile its realist interests and idealist values in the 21st century, much can be learned from US policy toward Saudi Arabia during the Cold War. This analysis reveals important lessons regarding the relationship between realist interests and idealist values and will inform future US policy decisions in the broader Middle East.

### ***US Cold War Policy toward Saudi Arabia***

To fully appreciate the degree to which US Cold War policy in Saudi Arabia neglected American idealist values, one must understand the condition of political rights and civil liberties in Saudi Arabia during the Cold War. Throughout this period, the Saudi regime was an autocratic monarchy that deprived its citizens of even the most basic political, religious, and civil liberties.<sup>9</sup> Freedom House, a nonpartisan organization that promotes democratic government and civil liberty around the world, has given Saudi Arabia the worst or second to worst ranking for political rights and civil liberty since 1972, when the organization began ranking countries.<sup>10</sup> While no country—including the United States—exhibited a perfect human rights record during the Cold War, Saudi Arabia represented one of the most authoritarian and oppressive regimes in the world.<sup>11</sup>

Considering the stark contrast between declared American ideals and the character of the Saudi government, one would expect the United States to have placed significant pressure on the Saudi regime to conduct political and civil reforms. However, both Republican and Democratic administrations failed to translate their liberal democratic values into consistent pressure on the Saudi regime. Even Jimmy Carter—a President renowned for his emphasis on human rights and democracy—failed to assertively press the Saudis to implement domestic reforms.

When President Carter assumed office, he brought with him an intense personal belief that authoritarian governments were counter to American interests.<sup>12</sup> After a short time in office, Carter announced, “We are now free of that inordinate fear of communism which once led us to embrace any dictator who joined us in that fear.”<sup>13</sup> However, with respect to Saudi Arabia, little evidence exists to demonstrate that the Carter Administration applied its human rights principles specifically or assertively. In a major policy speech at the University of Georgia on 30 April 1977, Secretary of State Cyrus Vance laid out the details of President Carter’s humanitarian-based foreign policy. Secretary Vance began his speech by saying, “I speak today about the resolve of this Administration to make the advancement of human rights a central part of our

foreign policy.”<sup>14</sup> Vance went on to define human rights violations as torture, arbitrary arrest or imprisonment, or the denial of basic civil and political liberties such as “freedom of thought, of religion, of assembly; freedom of speech; freedom of the press; [and] freedom of movement.”<sup>15</sup> Interestingly, Saudi Arabia violated every one of these human rights precepts. Given this fact and Secretary Vance’s statement that human rights would be a central part of the Carter foreign policy, one would have expected political and civil reform to enjoy a central place in US-Saudi dialogue during the Carter Administration.

Despite this idealist emphasis, however, the Carter Administration evidently never attempted to assertively promote human rights or democracy in Saudi Arabia. Less than one month after Vance’s speech, Crown Prince Fahd visited President Carter in Washington, D.C. At the White House on 24 May 1977, Carter welcomed the Crown Prince, saying, “I don’t believe there is any other nation with whom we’ve had better friendship and a deeper sense of cooperation than we’ve found in Saudi Arabia.” Throughout his lengthy remarks, President Carter failed to mention anything regarding Saudi Arabia’s political oppression or numerous human rights violations. The next day, Carter responded to a press question by saying, “And so far as I know, between ourselves and Saudi Arabia there are *no disturbing differences at all*.”<sup>16</sup> Almost five months later, President Carter met with the Saudi Foreign Minister. In the statement that details which topics were discussed, there is no mention of domestic reform in Saudi Arabia. In fact, the words “democracy” and “human rights” are completely absent. Admittedly, it may be possible that the Carter Administration chose to emphasize human rights more discreetly with Saudi Arabia. However, with most countries, the Carter Administration unabashedly promoted human rights, shaming friend and foe alike. Thus, the existence of an uncharacteristically discreet, behind-the-scenes Carter approach with the Saudis seems unlikely. Therefore, even during the Carter Administration, one finds an uncomfortable dissonance between American idealist values and actual US policy toward Saudi Arabia. Given the oppressive and authoritarian nature of the Saudi regime throughout the Cold War, one must ask why the policies that American idealist values demanded were never implemented.

#### *US Realist Interests and Idealist Values in Saudi Arabia*

The United States did not pressure Saudi Arabia in any assertive or consistent way to reform politically because American leaders did not believe political reform in Saudi Arabia was a strategic interest for the United States during the Cold War. Several documents written during the early stages of the Cold War list the US strategic interests in Saudi Arabia; political reform was not listed. In a then top-secret memorandum addressed to Under Secretary of State Dean Acheson in January 1945, a top US diplomat in Saudi

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Arabia enumerated the main strategic interests of the United States in Saudi Arabia. According to the memorandum, the United States sought “a strong and independent Saudi Arabian government” that would not be susceptible to “political penetration.” Second, the United States sought continued control of and access to the “vast oil resources of Saudi Arabia.”<sup>17</sup> More than four years later, in 1949, Secretary of State Acheson repeated these priorities in a top-secret telegram to the American consulate in Dhahran, writing that the United States “is vitally interested in (a) [Saudi] independence, (b) development of resources, and (c) resistance to [the] spread of communist doctrine.”<sup>18</sup>

Time and again, public and confidential primary sources throughout the Cold War demonstrate that the US interests in Saudi Arabia were essentially anti-communism and oil. The United States sought unlimited access to Saudi oil, and US leaders believed that reliable access to Saudi oil depended on a friendly Saudi Arabia free of internal instability and communist influence. Today, as the United States faces somewhat analogous questions regarding US realist interests and idealist values in the wider Middle East, it is worth examining whether the communist threat to Saudi Arabia genuinely necessitated a US policy that failed to implement US values.

*The Communist Threat to Saudi Arabia*

As early as January 1945, top-level US officials expressed concerns regarding the threat of communism in Saudi Arabia. While the Americans and Soviets were still fighting as allies against Nazi Germany, US diplomats expressed grave concerns regarding the Soviet threat to Saudi Arabia. US officials worried that the Soviet Union would take advantage of political instability to establish a presence in Saudi Arabia and potentially deny US access to Saudi oil.<sup>19</sup> Every US administration from Truman to Reagan—Democrats and Republicans alike—sought to counter the aggressive and expansionist tendencies of the Soviets in the Middle East.

Since this consistent fear of Soviet influence in the Middle East represented the primary justification for the lack of US political pressure on the authoritarian Saudi regime, it merits investigation whether this fear was genuinely justified. Undoubtedly, if given the opportunity, the Soviets would



have relished the opportunity to increase their influence in Saudi Arabia and deny the United States access to Saudi oil. However, if the United States unwittingly exaggerated the severity of the Soviet threat, then the Cold War explanation for the lack of US political pressure becomes more of a historic comment on distorted US perceptions than a legitimate justification for the unconditional US support of an authoritarian regime.

In hindsight, the US fear of increased Soviet influence in Saudi Arabia was largely unjustified. The primary reason for this relates to the character of the Saudi regime. Ibn Saud, the founder of modern Saudi Arabia, and his successors feared and hated communism.<sup>20</sup> The Saudis feared communism because of its stated expansionist goals and its success through the years in neighboring countries such as South Yemen, Ethiopia, and Afghanistan. The Saudis also hated communism because of its promotion of atheism and persecution of Muslims.<sup>21</sup> A statement by Amir Faisal to a British Ambassador in 1948 demonstrates the intensity of the Saudi fear and hatred of communism. Faisal expressed his concern that “time is on the side of the communists and . . . if they are given ten years of peace they will become so strong as to be undefeatable.” Sounding more like George Patton or Douglas MacArthur, Faisal reportedly suggested that the “anti-communist powers” should undertake a preventive war against the Soviet Union before it was too late.<sup>22</sup>

The Saudis consistently translated this fear and dislike for communism into tangible action. In a 1974 statement, Crown Prince Fahd said, “I intend to get the Russian communists out of Somalia. My policy will be to help the moderate forces in South Yemen. I will help the Sudan resist communist subversion.”<sup>23</sup> It is estimated that by 1978, Saudi Arabia spent an average of \$5 billion annually on foreign aid, much of it to oppose communism.<sup>24</sup> In fact, in that same year, Saudi Arabia funded the airlift of 1,500 Moroccan troops to Zaire to fight left-wing insurgents supported by the Marxist regime in Angola.<sup>25</sup>

In short, the Saudis feared Soviet aggression and intrigue, they were strongly opposed to the atheistic philosophies of communism, and they often backed up this distaste for communism with tangible steps. In hindsight, under no reasonable scenario would the Saudi regime—or the powerful Islamic extremists who supported the House of Saud—tolerate any significant communist presence in their country. The only possibility of Soviet control in Saudi Arabia would have been an outright invasion, which the United States never would have tolerated. One letter from King Saud in July 1955 demonstrates the sincerity and fervency of the Saudis’ anti-communist credentials:

Our very special attitude towards communism is well-known to [the] US government and to [the] world. It is our interest that communism not infiltrate into any



area of the Middle East. In opposing communism, we do so on basic religious belief and Islamic principle, in which we believe with all of our heart, and not to please America or western states. My position, in particular, of Moslem Arab King, servant to Holy Shrines, looked up to by 400 million Moslems in East and West, is extremely delicate and serious before God, my nation, and history.<sup>26</sup>

As this letter demonstrates, the Saudi regime was fundamentally anti-communist, and US fears of Soviet influence within the Kingdom were largely unwarranted. This is not to say that the Soviets did not attempt to increase their influence in and around Saudi Arabia; they did. However, given the nature of the Saudi royalty and the religious culture of the nation, nothing short of an implausible Soviet invasion would have succeeded in establishing a significant communist influence in the Kingdom.

So how or why did the United States misread the severity of the communist threat in the Middle East when the Saudi regime and the vast majority of Saudi citizens were vehemently anti-communist? The reason seems to be primarily because of Saudi regional insecurity and the resulting Saudi diplomacy. By the 1940s, due to Saudi Arabia's history, largely indefensible borders, inadequate military, and coveted oil resources, the Saudi royalty had developed a strong sense of insecurity. In fact, many American requests for oil concessions or air bases in Saudi Arabia were countered by Saudi requests for military equipment. Interestingly, the Saudis usually cited other Arab states as the primary threat to Saudi security and sovereignty. In particular, in the mid-1940s the Saudis feared foreign intrigue from the Hashemite rulers in Iraq and Transjordan. The King worried that "in bitter and ancient enmity they work against me and my country."<sup>27</sup>

The United States dismissed these Saudi concerns regarding Hashemite intrigue and potential aggression, saying in December 1947 that they were "primarily a matter for intra-Arab consideration."<sup>28</sup> Not surprisingly, after that State Department response to the Saudi royals, one notes an increasing Saudi emphasis on the threat of communism. In a frequently repeated sequence, the Saudi King or Foreign Minister would gravely express his country's concerns to the Americans regarding communism just before making another request for American weaponry, security assurances, or foreign aid.<sup>29</sup> This is not to suggest that the Saudis did not genuinely fear Soviet subversion or aggression. On the contrary, as already described, the Saudis perceived Soviet-supported communism as a genuine threat. Regardless, the Saudis increasingly characterized their regional security concerns in terms of communism, thereby receiving a more sympathetic and tangible American response. Therefore, a major explanation for the American exaggeration of the communist threat in the Middle East relates to the Saudi emphasis on the

threat of communism. This shrewd Saudi technique of characterizing largely regional power struggles in a Cold War context contributed to an exaggerated American perception of the communist threat in the Middle East.

### ***Balancing Realism and Idealism***

The United States confronts a significant dilemma today as it seeks to promote democracy in the Middle East. On one hand, the United States needs the continued support and friendship of its authoritarian allies in order to ensure access to Middle Eastern oil and in order to fight international terrorism. On the other hand, the ultimate democratization of the Middle East will by definition require that these same authoritarian rulers eventually allow national elections and most likely relinquish power. Not surprisingly, this realization has motivated authoritarian rulers throughout the Middle East to resist political and civil reform. During the Cold War, as we have seen, the Saudis gained US support and deflected American pressure for political and civil reform by exaggerating the Soviet threat to Saudi Arabia.

As the United States presses for Middle Eastern reform, US decision-makers should expect continued foot-dragging from authoritarian rulers in the Middle East. One should expect that in order to justify their understandable reluctance to relinquish power, our authoritarian allies will exaggerate potential pitfalls of political reform. During the Cold War, the House of Saud emphasized the Soviet threat, and today the Saudis are emphasizing the domestic threat posed by Islamic extremists. While this threat is real and the United States should take the Sunni extremists in Saudi Arabia seriously, the United States also should not allow the Saudis to indefinitely postpone reform based on worst-case scenarios. The United States needs to ensure that Saudi Islamic extremists who are sympathetic to Osama bin Laden do not gain control of the world's most important oil supply. However, the United States also should end five decades of policy that sacrificed idealist values to exaggerated threat assessments.

### ***Proceed with Caution***

While the United States needs to examine its unconditional support for friendly authoritarian regimes, US foreign policy must not completely neglect the realist concerns that dominated US Cold War thinking. During the Cold War, as we have seen, the United States was reluctant to push for reform in Saudi Arabia for fear that the Soviets might come to control or influence Saudi Arabia's valuable oil resources. As a result, the United States did not assertively or consistently seek political or civil reform in Saudi Arabia during the Cold War. The attacks on 9/11 revealed the costs of a Cold War policy in the Middle East that neglected US values and ignored the wisdom of ideal-

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ist theory. The United States spoke of “self-determination” and “democracy” while supporting the authoritarian regime in Saudi Arabia. This inconsistency reduced US “soft power,” embittering many Arabs against a country that often said one thing and then did another.<sup>30</sup> As the US foreign policy community has realized the costs of this strategy, there has been a tendency to abandon traditional realist concerns and aggressively pursue liberal and democratic reform. While this reaction is understandable and well-intentioned, the American people are not served by the abandonment of one extreme for the other. Neglecting idealist wisdom during the Cold War was unwise; similarly, abandoning realist concerns in the wake of 9/11 would be equally imprudent. The preeminent US realist interest in the Middle East is oil, and if the United States pursues political and civil reform recklessly or too aggressively, US access to Saudi oil could be endangered.

In 1973, in response to the US support of Israel during the Yom Kippur War, a Saudi-led coalition of oil producers initiated an oil embargo that resulted in a fourfold increase in oil prices.<sup>31</sup> The 1973 oil embargo damaged the US economy and dramatically demonstrated the seriousness of US oil dependence. The significant cost incurred by the US economy and the American people during the 1973 oil embargo is not simply an interesting piece of historical trivia. Rather, the 1973 embargo represents an often forgotten and fundamentally important warning to US decisionmakers. The United States is significantly more dependent on Saudi oil now than in 1973. Overall, US petroleum imports have doubled since 1973, but US imports from Saudi Arabia have almost quadrupled. Stated differently, as a percentage of total imports, the United States is twice as dependent on Saudi oil now as it was in 1973.<sup>32</sup>

Saudi oil is not only important to the US economy, but it is equally important, if not more so, to the world economy. Saudi Arabia has become the most important oil producer in the world. Any major disruption in Saudi oil exports would have devastating effects on the world economy. Saudi Arabia produces more crude oil than any other country, and in 2003 the Saudis produced roughly nine million barrels of crude oil per day.<sup>33</sup> The enormous clout this oil production capability affords Saudi Arabia is augmented by two important characteristics of the Saudi oil industry. First, Saudi Arabia possesses

the world's largest oil reserves, with almost 22 percent of the world's known oil reserves resting under the sands of that country.<sup>34</sup> In other words, Saudi Arabia is not running out of oil anytime soon. Second, in addition to its enormous oil reserves, Saudi Arabia also consistently maintains the world's only significant excess production capability. For example, in September 2004, world excess oil capacity was only 500,000 to one million barrels per day, and all of it was found in Saudi Arabia.<sup>35</sup> This "slack capacity" allows Saudi Arabia to wield tremendous influence in determining the global price of oil. In short, Saudi Arabia's oil production capacity, combined with its large oil reserves and excess production capacity, establish the Kingdom as the dominant player in the global crude oil market.

Therefore, as in the past, a major US and international objective should be the maintenance of a stable and moderate government in Saudi Arabia that will ensure the continued flow of Saudi oil to the world's industrialized nations. From a solely US perspective, America's enormous dependence on Saudi Arabian oil demands that the United States avoid any policies that might jeopardize the reliable flow of Saudi oil to US consumers. However, this reality of US energy dependence must be balanced with the lessons America has learned from the Cold War and 9/11. Stability is important, but neglecting idealist principles for the sake of stability can ultimately damage both America's conscience and its international interests. Fortunately, the United States does not have to sacrifice stability in order to achieve democratic reform in Saudi Arabia and other Middle Eastern countries.

### *Practical Idealism*

The United States can achieve democratic reform throughout the Middle East without risking unacceptable levels of instability by implementing a new strategy in the Middle East based on the principles of practical idealism. Broadly speaking, a strategy based on practical idealism would inculcate the lessons of Cold War history by combining the wisdom of both realism *and* idealism into a comprehensive approach toward the Middle East. Such a policy would satisfy US realist interests by fostering stability in the region, thereby ensuring US access to Middle Eastern oil. At the same time, this approach would not repeat the costly Cold War mistake of neglecting US idealist principles. A US strategy in the Middle East based on practical idealism would be consistent and assertive—yet patient—in the pursuit of a more democratic Middle East.

Admittedly, it is much easier to critique and propose US policy than it is to manage and implement change. Nonetheless, a US grand strategy in the Middle East that seeks to satisfy both America's realist interests and idealist principles is not only necessary and desirable, but it is feasible as well. If

the new strategy begins with the correct premise and is animated by two important characteristics, then the United States can simultaneously foster Middle Eastern stability, protect US national interests, and promote a transition to a more democratic Middle East.

Throughout the Cold War, too many policymakers explicitly or implicitly adopted the notion that America's realist interests and idealist principles could not be reconciled in the Middle East. The success of future US policy in the Middle East depends largely on a widespread rejection of this notion. Those who suggest that the United States must choose between stability and reform in the Middle East offer a false dichotomy. The United States can successfully promote Middle Eastern stability and secure its realist interests in the region while concurrently and successfully pressuring America's authoritarian allies in the region to implement reforms. Incorporating the following recommendations will increase the likelihood of success of any future US strategy in the Middle East.

First, many US strategists and policymakers must adjust their expectations and timelines regarding the democratization process in the Middle East. The American political process tends to reward immediate results, encouraging politicians to adopt unrealistic timelines. However, the road from authoritarianism to democracy is usually slow and arduous, full of pitfalls and setbacks. The US government and the American people should not expect countries in the Middle East to make this transition in just a few years. Expectations for democratization should be measured in terms of decades rather than years. Examples of this lengthy democratization process abound, but the most compelling example is the United States itself. Depending how one defines liberal democracy, the United States did not truly become a liberal democracy until the mid 19th or early 20th century. It is difficult to argue that the United States was a liberal democracy before the emancipation of the slaves in the 1860s or even the attainment of women's suffrage in 1920. In other words, the United States needed roughly 100 to 150 years to attain the basic characteristics of a liberal democracy. Expecting Saudi Arabia or any other Middle Eastern country to accomplish this same feat within one or two presidential terms is unreasonable and counterproductive.

It is this impatience with the democratization process that represents one of the greatest explanations for the development of the false dichotomy between stability and reform. If the United States insists that an authoritarian government transform itself into a democracy in a few short years, it should be little surprise that this process has a destabilizing effect.<sup>36</sup> Instead, with the benefit of wisdom gleaned from the last half century, the US strategy should be to promote democratization over the long term, seeking consistent and gradual progress toward a more democratic ideal.<sup>37</sup> The United States should

seek tangible steps from its Middle Eastern allies, but must do so according to a realistic timetable. If the United States encourages a consistent, gradual transition toward democracy in the Middle East, then the United States can simultaneously protect its access to Middle Eastern oil and remain faithful to its democratic principles.

The second characteristic necessary for a successful US strategy in the Middle East is the placement of popular elections in their proper democratic perspective. Elections represent an essential component of the modern notion of liberal democracy, but elections are not the only component. Constrained executive power, rule of law, an independent and nondiscriminatory judiciary, civil liberties such as the freedom of the press and the freedom to join groups and lobby government, and the right to own private property are also important components of a healthy liberal democracy.<sup>38</sup> Elections in a country that has not had the time to develop these important components often result in an unstable and tenuous “democracy” that frequently falls back into authoritarianism. One should not forget that Adolf Hitler used free elections to become the chancellor of Germany.<sup>39</sup> Therefore, as Fareed Zakaria argues, the United States should seek to promote constitutional liberalism before seeking elections. The presence of a vibrant civil society—alternate centers of power that can counterbalance state power—increases the likelihood that the democratization process will succeed.

Many observers correctly suggest that national elections in countries such as Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Egypt—in the near term—would likely bring anti-American Islamic radicals to power who could endanger US interests in the region. However, the United States can avoid this potential catastrophe, protect its realist interests, and promote its idealist principles by encouraging other liberal democratic reforms before insisting on national elections. If the United States is seen as the booster of genuine liberal reform in the Middle East, popular Middle Eastern perceptions of the United States will improve, and the United States will be able to safely encourage national elections throughout the Middle East at some point in the future.<sup>40</sup> Adopting this strategy will ensure that US policy in the Middle East is consistent with American interests and principles.

## ***Conclusion***

US policy in Saudi Arabia and the wider Middle East should be based on a healthy respect for the wisdom of both idealism and realism and a nuanced understanding of their relationship. America does not have to choose between its conscience and its economic and political needs; a prudent US foreign policy of practical idealism can satisfy both. US decisionmakers should reject an



emotional or dogmatic allegiance to either realism or idealism. If the United States continues to preach freedom and democracy while supporting Middle East dictators, then oppressed and frustrated citizens in the region will grow increasingly radicalized and hostile to the United States. However, as the United States begins to hold its Middle Eastern allies to higher standards of political and economic freedom, US leaders should not underestimate the importance of traditional realist interests in the region.

For almost 50 years, US decisionmakers worked assiduously to keep Soviet influence out of Saudi Arabia in order to ensure US access to Saudi oil. Now that the United States is even more dependent on Saudi oil, and as Sunni extremists within Saudi Arabia seek to destabilize the Saudi regime, the United States should not neglect the importance of reliable US access to Saudi oil. In the long term, President Bush is correct: America's interests and values are one. However, in the short term, the United States must recognize its realist interests and vulnerabilities in the Middle East, while working patiently and consistently toward a more democratic and free Middle East.

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4. John Q. Adams, speech, 4 July 1821, <http://www.thisnation.com/library/jqadams1821.html>.
5. Michael Doyle, *Ways of War and Peace* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997), p. 259.
6. Michael W. Doyle, "Kant, Liberal Legacies, and Foreign Affairs," in *Debating Democratic Peace*, ed. Michael E. Brown, et al. (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1997), pp. 24-25; John Owen, "How Liberalism Produces Democratic Peace," *International Security*, 19 (Fall 1994), 87-125; Bruce Russett and John Oneal, *Triangulating Peace: Democracy, Interdependence, and International Organizations* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001).
7. Recent scholarship suggests that democracies may be less likely to fight each other, but they are not necessarily more peaceful.
8. Tony Smith, *America's Mission: The United States and the Worldwide Struggle for Democracy in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1994), p. 12.
9. For a detailed discussion of Saudi Arabia's abuses of political, religious, and civil liberty, see Daniel Pipes, "The Scandal of US-Saudi Relations," *National Interest*, No. 70 (Winter 2002/2003).
10. Freedom House, Saudi Arabia Country Report, <http://www.freedomhouse.org/research/freeworld/2003/countryratings/saudi-arabia.htm>.
11. The abusive nature of the Saudi regime often affected foreign nationals as well. During the 1950s, Saudi Arabia implemented a policy stating that American soldiers and civilians of the Jewish faith could not enter the US airbase in Dhahran. One can find Senator Jacob Javitz's 9 April 1957 speech in the *Congressional Record*, Vol. 103, part 4, 85th Cong., p. 5324. Also, Saudi Arabia appears to have enslaved a large number of foreign nationals well into the 1960s. One source estimates that there were approximately 30,000 slaves in Saudi Arabia as late as 1962. David Holden and Richard Johns, *The House of Saud* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1981), p. 221.
12. Smith, p. 260.
13. Jimmy Carter, speech, 22 May 1977, *US Department of State Bulletin*, 76 (April-June 1977), 622.
14. Cyrus Vance, speech, "Human Rights and Foreign Policy," 30 April 1977, *US Department of State Bulletin*, 76 (April-June 1977), 505.
15. Ibid.
16. "Remarks by President Carter," *US Department of State Bulletin*, 77 (October-December 1977), 673.



17. The third American strategic interest in Saudi Arabia was related to American access to airbases for the prosecution of the war against Germany and Japan. US Department of State, paper covering US-Saudi relations, 11 April 1947, *State Dept. Files, 1945-1949*, XII, 372.
18. Top-secret outgoing telegram from Secretary of State Acheson to the American Consulate in Dhahran, 23 March 1949, *State Dept. Files, 1945-1949*, XII, 562.
19. This US fear is ubiquitous throughout Cold War primary sources. A few examples include: US Department of State, paper covering US-Saudi relations, 11 April 1947, *State Dept. Files, 1945-1949*, XII, 372; top-secret letter to Dean Acheson, 27 January 1945, *State Dept. Files, 1945-1949*, I, 33; policy statement on Saudi Arabia, 18 May 1949, *State Dept. Files, 1945-1949*, XII, 578; aide memoir from meeting with King Saud, 30 March 1949, *State Dept. Files, 1945-1949*, XII, 572.
20. US Department of State policy statement on Saudi Arabia, *State Dept. Files, 1945-1949*, XII, 578.
21. Saudis noted with disgust the periodic discrimination and harassment of Muslims in communist countries. One Department of State telegram from the Jidda legation sent in 1948 cited several sources of Saudi popular hatred for the Soviet Union. During the two previous years, the Soviet Union did not allow its Muslim citizens to make the annual pilgrimage to Mecca. Stories of Soviet Muslims fleeing Soviet persecution and seeking citizenship in Turkey, combined with accounts of Iranian Muslims who feared and hated the USSR, only exacerbated popular Saudi hatred for the Soviet Union. US Department of State, telegram to Secretary of State from Jidda legation, 6 December 1948, *State Dept. Files, 1945-1949*, I, 470.
22. US Department of State, secret airgram from US diplomat in Jidda to US Secretary of State, 1 September 1948, *State Dept. Files, 1945-1949*, I, 288-89.
23. Adeed Dawisha, "The Soviet Union in the Arab World: The Limits to Superpower Influence," in *The Soviet Union in the Middle East*, ed. Adeed Dawisha and Karen Dawisha (London: Heinemann, 1982), p. 21.
24. Holden and Johns, p. 488.
25. Ibid.
26. US Department of State, secret telegram to Secretary of State from Jidda containing letter from King Saud, 25 July 1955, *State Dept. Files, 1955-1959*, B18929, XI, 594.
27. US Department of State, top-secret transcript of meeting with Ibn Saud, 31 December 1945, *State Dept. Files, 1945-1949*, I, 98-100.
28. US Department of State, top-secret telegram, 12 December 1947, *State Dept. Files, 1945-1949*, I, 228.
29. US Department of State, top-secret telegram to Secretary of State describing US diplomat's meeting with King Saud, 11 May 1949, *State Dept. Files, 1945-1949*, I, 316; top-secret US government office memorandum detailing repeated instances in which King of Saudi Arabia highlighted communist threat and asked for US military equipment, *State Dept. Files, 1945-1949*, I, 284.
30. According to the 2005 Pew Research Center's Global Opinion survey, 81 percent of respondents in the Middle East believe that US policies caused the September 11th attacks. While respondents in the Middle East admire ideals such as freedom of speech, fair elections, and an independent judiciary that are often associated with the United States, these same respondents also harbor overwhelmingly negative attitudes toward the United States.
31. Leonardo Maugeri, "Not in Oil's Name," *Foreign Affairs*, 82 (July/August 2003).
32. US Energy Information Administration, *Annual Energy Review 2003*, Table 5.4, "Petroleum Imports by Country of Origin, 1960-2003."
33. US Energy Information Administration, *Annual Energy Review 2003*, Table 11.5, "World Crude Oil Production, 1960-2003."
34. US Energy Information Administration, *Annual Energy Review 2003*, Table 11.4, "World Crude Oil and Natural Gas Reserves, January 1, 2003."
35. US Energy Information Administration, "Persian Gulf Oil and Gas Exports Fact Sheet," <http://www.eia.doe.gov/cabs/pgulf.html>.
36. One example is the Iranian Revolution of 1979. While this event was the result of many complex social factors within Iran, some credibly suggest that the Carter Administration's intense and arguably impatient pressure contributed notably to the fall of the Shah.
37. Many factors beyond US control will determine the ultimate success or failure of democratic reform in the Middle East. However, the United States should ensure that its substantial influence promotes a consistent and gradual transition to a more free and democratic Middle East while avoiding the political crises and Iranian-style revolutions that could endanger US interests in the region.
38. Larry Diamond, *Developing Democracy: Toward Consolidation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1999), pp. 1-19.
39. Fareed Zakaria, *The Future of Freedom: Illiberal Democracy at Home and Abroad* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2003), p. 17.
40. US policy with respect to Iraq and Israel and US behavior in the global struggle against radical Islam will also significantly affect Middle Eastern perceptions of the United States.